©Fabrice Monteiro: The Prophecy - untitled

Introduction

A gigantic figure looms, clothes merging into the rubbish heap on which it stands… smoke is billowing, obscuring a muted and despairing landscape. Not the normal clichéd view of Africa, but a vision of a resident of Senegal with a desire for change. In this essay I look at Fabrice Monteiro, the photographer, the background to the image, how I interpret the work and how it fits into the broader genre of conservation photography.

Fabrice Monteiro is of Belgian and Beninese extraction who has made his home in Senegal. His work background was that of an engineer before moving into photo-reportage and fashion photography (Monteiro, 2015a in French). He was shocked by the environmental degradation he had seen in Senegal and sought to address it via photography. He teamed up with renowned Senegalese costume designer Doulsy, was funded by Ecofund.org (Ecofund, 2014) and supported by several local environmental activists.
The image is part of a series *The Prophecy* (Monteiro, 2015b) aimed at starting a dialogue with local Senegalese about environment concerns. The series was taken over a period of 8 months in 2014 in a variety of locations in Senegal; this image is from a large rubbish tip by a marsh in Dakar.

**Interpretation**

In the photograph we see a larger-than-life dominating female figure, apparently a djinn, one of the daughters of the earth god, returned to give warning of what we are doing to the Gaia, the Earth. She is overlooking a burning rubbish tip with polluted water close by. In the distance we can see countryside and a flying bird. The creature’s face is covered by plastic, her hair is braided using plastic. She is holding a baby doll and is wearing a costume made of a variety of plastic bags (recovered from the tip and made into the costume by Doulsy) which merge into the rubbish tip.

The image has strong visual and theatrical elements where the juxtaposition of nature, pollution and the figure create a surrealistic image which engages and ask more of the viewer. It has a clear narrative, a parable aimed not only at the local Senegalese audience but at us all: Excessive usage of single-use plastic is bad.

At first glance, the image is one that would not seem out of place in any fashion magazine. Closer examination, however, reveals both the all-important conservation aspects and elements deeply connected to West African culture. For example, the djinn is a powerful symbol for many Africans; the use of braids reinforces the mystic nature of the djinn. The solitary bird flying towards horizon might be regarded in several ways. Birds in different African cultures (Wildlifecampus.com, n.d.) can have many connotations; they can represent the soul, or hope, or more prosaically simply a vulture waiting to pick at our remains. The key element (*punctum*) of the photograph for me is the baby doll being held by the foot. The symbolism is unclear, likewise whether the baby is supposed to be alive, dying or dead. It could represent the people of Senegal, implying uncertainty as to whether their fate is to be dropped into the abyss or be brought to the faraway green horizon. It is this attention to detail that make it a picture worth deeper investigation. The series title, *The Prophecy*, is ambiguous; are we being told simply about the coming of the djinn, or is it about the fate of the environment and its inhabitants? Who is making the prophecy, the photographer or the djinn?

**Conservation photography**

It is interesting to compare the Monteiro photograph with other examples of conservation photography. This genre has a number of possible approaches: is it a single image or multiple; is it a long-term or short-term project, and, most importantly, whether the work *soothes* or
shocks. On this latter point the general approach is evolving, from early 20th century images showing the beauty of the environment, to horrific images of destruction, to something more nuanced and in-between (Mittermeier, 2006). However, the most important aspect of conservation photography is the impact and tangible outcomes that the work produces for the environment, rather than simply the work itself (see (Conservationphotographers.org, n.d.)).

The Prophecy broadly fits into the conservation photography genre, being a long-term project and mixing soothing and shocking aspects. Where it is unusual, perhaps unique, is combining aspects of fashion industry (which itself has an uneasy relationship with the world of conservation) with deep consideration of the culture of the intended audience. Moreover, instead of the more usual substantial accompanying text, Monteiro only supplies us with an ambiguous title. The images are intended to speak for themselves. In terms of the impact of the work (generally not easy to assess, see Scott 2018), this is perhaps best judged by Monteiro himself in interview (Stone, 2017)

Finally, has anything changed in Senegal or in West Africa more broadly on an environmental level in the three years since you launched The Prophecy?

Things are very contradictory, on one end the use of plastic bags has been forbidden last year but on the other end, they are building a coal plant 30km from the capital to produce electricity with coal imported from India...

Summary

In summary I find the photograph is visually strong, with attractive composition and colours, combined with elements of fashion photography. It contains a carefully crafted message to local people, and it has several details that echo local culture. I find the image intriguing, with room for the viewer’s interpretation. Comparing it with other conservation photographs, this image has several unique features that make it stand out. Its final conservation impact may ultimately turn out to have been limited but it was a powerful call to action and local empowerment for change, and, quoting another, early conservation photographer, Ansel Adams (Abel-Hirsch, 2018)

If you take photographs, make the photographs useful.

This photograph more than fulfils that maxim.

(word count 979)

References


